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CANADA

Alberta ends its vaccine passport: 'These restrictions have led to terrible division'

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney has ended the province's vaccine passport system and laid out a plan to further loosen other restrictions, saying "We cannot remain at a heightened state of emergency forever."

By **Kieran Leavitt** Edmonton Bureau

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EDMONTON—Alberta's vaccine passport program ends at midnight on Tuesday, Premier Jason Kenney has announced.

The passport system — formally the Restrictions Exemption Program, requiring people prove they've been vaccinated before they can go to restaurants or attend events — is the first of the province's current public health restrictions to go, in a phased approach Kenney laid out in a news conference Tuesday.

"Now is the time to begin learning to live with COVID," said Kenney. "These restrictions have led to terrible division.

"We cannot remain at a heightened state of emergency forever. We have to begin to heal."

Kenney announced a three-stage approach for further loosening of public health restrictions.

First, the province will remove nearly all restrictions for children, including the mask mandate in schools (kindergarten to Grade 12) over the coming weekend. Kids aged 12 and under also won't have to abide by the general mask mandate in Alberta, though the general mandate will still apply for everyone else.

"It is time to let kids be kids," said Kenney.

Some capacity limits are still in place in Alberta in the first stage, which was to begin Tuesday at midnight, including restrictions on closing times for restaurants, alcohol service and table capacity for dining. There are also still capacity limits for venues that can hold between 500 and 1,000 people — they are capped at 500. Venues that can hold 1,000 or more people must remain at 50 per cent capacity.

Hospitalizations in Alberta have been on a downward trend recently, Kenney said. There were 1,494 non-ICU patients in the hospital as of Monday, down from a peak during the Omicron wave of 1,568 last week. In the ICU, there are currently 129 patients, a number that's jumped slightly in recent weeks, as last Tuesday had 108 in ICU.

Kenney also said most wastewater analysis across the province showed signs of a decrease in spread of the virus.

Presuming that hospitalizations keep decreasing, Kenney said the province would move, after three weeks of monitoring the changes, to Stage 2. This step would see almost all the remaining restrictions lifted, including the general mask mandate, work-from-home orders, and capacity limits.

Kenney hopes to see Alberta reach this stage by March 1 and it would also see all remaining school restrictions (like cohorting), capacity limits for all venues and limits on social gatherings removed.

The final stage would see all remaining restrictions lifted. Kenney cautioned that if the health-care system feels too much pressure from COVID, the province might have to pause the lifting of rules.

"The threat of COVID-19 to public health no longer outweighs the hugely damaging impact of health restrictions," said Kenney.

"We are well positioned to live with this virus."

Kenney faced widespread criticism [last summer](#) after dropping COVID-19 restrictions and declaring it "the best summer ever," while promising never to bring in a vaccine passport. Then, in the face of skyrocketing cases throughout August and September, he reversed course, ushering in the Restrictions Exemption Program. (Alberta's version of the vaccine passport is voluntary for businesses, but those that do not participate are subject to extra restrictions — including severely reduced customer capacity.)

Ever since that pivot, Kenney's faced a teetering situation within his own United Conservative Party, as some have accused him of not doing enough to deal with the pandemic while others have said he went overboard with restrictions. He's facing tanking approval ratings (in the low to mid-20s) in public opinion polls, and a looming leadership review in April.

Tuesday's announcement comes as Alberta slogs through a second week of truck-convoy protests that have blared through cities and snarled traffic at the Coutts border crossing with Montana.

Some Conservative politicians have shown support to the demonstrators, including interim Conservative Party of Canada leader Candice Bergen. And, on Tuesday, [Liberal MP Joël Lightbound broke ranks](#) with his party, saying the federal government's policies have caused too much division in the country.

In neighbouring British Columbia, NDP Premier John Horgan said Tuesday that health officials in the province want to be cautious when lifting restrictions and won't be pressured by a small minority of people who are "honking horns," The Canadian Press reported.

"We want to make sure that the sacrifices that businesses and workers and communities have made over the past two years are not just thrown away because of some noise on the legislative lawn or in the capital city of Canada."

Ontario is in Stage 1 of easing restrictions imposed during the Omicron surge. On Feb. 21, gathering limits will increase to 25 people indoors and 100 outdoors, and capacity limits in venues with proof of vaccination requirements — such as restaurants and bars — will be lifted. As well, sporting and concert venues will increase to 50 per cent capacity. Further restrictions would come March 14.

Kenney announced during a Facebook Live appearance last Thursday that he'd soon make public the end date for vaccine passports in the province. Critics saw it as the premier bowing to pressure put on his government by the protesters.

Reports had surfaced last week of rural UCP MLAs meeting with some blockaders near Coutts to negotiate the end of the vaccine passport. However, UCP caucus chair Nathan Neudorf denied those reports, saying "no such agreement has been authorized and the meeting is not to discuss lifting" the program) and Kenney has insisted he would not make policy decisions based on protests.

The premier has also credited the vaccine passport program for a "major increase" in Alberta's vaccination rates.

Canada's chief public health officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, tweeted Tuesday that nationally the seven-day average is still above 12,000 new cases daily, but that COVID cases are "decreasing in most jurisdictions."

"With hospitals heavily strained and daily hospital/ICU counts still high/rising in several jurisdictions, we're not out of the woods yet," she added. "(Vaccines) remain the best tools we have for a safer descent."



Kieran Leavitt is an Edmonton-based political reporter for the Toronto Star. Follow him on Twitter: [@kieranleavitt](#)

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